

The Strong Female Character that Wasn't: Female Leads & the Superhero Genre in the 21st Century

Author Biography

Fionnuala Doran is an Irish artist, living and working between Scotland and England. She graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2015 and is senior lecturer at Teesside University's newly launched BA in Comics, Graphic Novels and Sequential Art. Her first graphic novel, [The Trial of Roger Casement](#), chronicling the contested life of Irish rebel, revolutionary and gay icon, Sir Roger Casement, is released September 2016 by [Self Made Hero](#). She came down with a bad case of comic-fever in 1990 and has never recovered.

Abstract

In this paper I interrogate the objectification of female leads in the mainstream, superhero genre of the comics industry and discusses how the continual dominance of male writers and editors mitigates against more authentic representations of women.

I argue that the trope of the Strong Female Character depicts women's empowerment as seen through a heterosexual male gaze that reinforces

damaging and regressive stereotypes. Sexual objectification is repackaged as an empowered ownership of sexuality in female-led books, with appearance, behaviour and plot all aimed at titillating heterosexual male desire.

I document the creation of a hostile and defensive attitude within the major publishers to reader criticism, and the barriers 'group-think' creates to non-male participation at writer and editorial level, particularly in regards to its effect on perceptions of quality and value. I also detail how homogenous groups lack a wider cultural perspective that renders them at greater risk of depicting female characters' choices and actions in a way that alienates the readership.

My approach to this misrepresentation is primarily informed by 'Structural Aporia & White Masculinities: White Men Respond to the White Male Privilege Critique' (Farough, 2003), 'Hot, Black Leather, Whip: The (De)evolution of Female Protagonists in Action Cinema, 1960-2014' (Heldman, Frankel and Holmes, 2016), C Wright Mills' notion of an intersection between social theory and fiction, and the work of Irving Janis.

I finish by looking at potential remedies for this institutionalisation of the male point of view and the barriers to change—such as 'gender-blindness'—that mitigate against them.